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ABSTRACT

In order to determine if media dependency has effects on audience members, a study was conducted among 460 randomly chosen household heads in Syracuse, New York. The respondents were asked to answer questions designed to measure media dependency in terms of use and of reliance on the various media. The questionnaire included a measure of audience evaluation of national and local government. There is some evidence that persons dependent on newspapers were more favorably inclined toward local government than persons not newspaper dependent. Analysis of the responses to additional questions shows that media dependency is related to perception of media credibility. Systematic analysis of the public affairs materials of the various media is needed to determine exactly what it is that produces the media dependency effects. (Six tables are included.) (JF)

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Newspaper and Television Dependencies: Their Effects on Evaluations of Governmental Leaders

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Newspaper and Television Dependencies:
Their Effects on Evaluations of Governmental Leaders

Even to the casual observer, television news is strikingly different from that of the daily newspaper. Television news is more dependent on visuals. It is presented by a recognizeable anchorperson rather than a faceless reporter. And there is simply much less of it.

Systematic analyses, however, have shown that the differences between the news presented by the two media are even more substantial than the surface impressions would suggest. What is more important, there is evidence these differences in news presentations affect the ways audience members react to the world about them.

Patterson and McClure (1976), for example, in their study of the 1972 Presidential campaign, found that television news focused on the hoopla of the campaign at the expense of presentation of issues and the attributes of the candidates. Newspaper news tends to be concerned less with where the candidates visited each day and the oddities of the travel schedule and more with the substance of the contest. And when television did cover the issues of that Nixon-McGovern contest, it tended to emphasize different issues than did the newspapers (Patterson and McClure, 1976; Shaw and Clemmer,1977).

Robinson (1975), in fact, has argued that television news, as compared with newspaper news, is predominantly negative and conflictual, focuses on images and impressions rather than substantive data, and is artificially balanced to present both sides of issues even when one side is clearly unequal to another. Problems are emphasized at the expense of solutions. And national issues are given more attention than local problems.

The consequence of this type of television presentation, Robinson argues, is that those persons dependent on television for their public affairs materials are likely to be more negativistic in their assessment of government. The data seem to bear him out. Robinson's analysis of the national electoral data sets accumulated by the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan shows that persons relying on television are more likely to think they cannot understand politics than those not so dependent on television. They also are more likely to think governmental leaders are crooked and to think members of Congress tend to lose touch with their constituents once they are elected. The findings hold after education of the respondent is used as a control.

Earlier analysis by Robinson (1974) of reactions to Watergate also supported this position. Persons watching the televised Senate Watergate hearings were found to have

increased hostility to government and an increasing sense of personal perplexity. McLeod, Brown, Becker and Ziemke (1977) found, by comparison, that, for young persons, following those hearings in the print media was associated with seeing the scandal as atypical and absolving the political system of guilt. Attention to the hearings on television was not found to have a similar effect.

These apparent differences in effects on political trust of the news of the two media are augmented by evidence television is less effective than newspapers in influencing audience members' prominence ratings of various issues (McClure and Patterson, 1976; McCombs, 1977) and in transmitting factual knowledge (Robinson, 1974). Gerbner and Gross (1976) have demonstrated that heavy television viewers in general (not just of news) are more likely than light viewers to exaggerate their own chances of being involved in crime, as well as report that people cannot be trusted.

Television and newspapers employ radically different technologies in assembling their news products, and it should not be surprising to find that these products are different. The implications of the evidence that these differences in news presentation are manifest in audience responses, however, are quite dramatic. The data suggest that the media, through the news they present, are creating distinct views of reality for their audience members.

1977 Syracuse Study

To test the generalizability of these findings and their implications, a survey was undertaken in the Spring of 1977. The cite of the study, Syracuse, located in upstate New York, is a diversified community of approximately 200,000 persons. It is the center of a thriving industrial and agricultural community with 800,000 residents.

The study extended the research on media dependency and evaluations of government in two ways. First, the questionnaire was designed to measure media dependency both in terms of use and reliance on the various media. The existing research has measured dependency primarily in terms of use alone. And second, the questionnaire included separate measures of audience evaluations of national and local government.

The expectation underlying the research was that indeed those persons who were dependent on television, when compared with newspaper dependent persons, would be more critical and less trusting of government. The differences were expected because of differences in the news operations of the two media. The news operation differences were expected to be reflected rather consistently in different news products.

Because those differences in media products ought to be most exaggerated on the local level, where television news

programming, particularly, is generally less professional from a journalistic point of view, the expected relationship between media dependency and criticism ought to be strongest where local government is concerned. The relationship was expected to hold, however, on the national level as well.

The Syracuse data consisted of telephone interview responses from a sample of 460 household heads whose telephone numbers had been generated randomly by computer. Trained interviewers were instructed to contact that person 18 years old or older in the household who was the primary financial contributor. Sex of respondent, however, was predetermined to guarantee proportionate representation of males and females. In other words, every household with an adult male and adult female was considered to have two household heads. The interview was conducted with the male or the female, depending on predesignation. When only one adult lived in the household, that person was interviewed, regardless of prior designation of sex of the respondent.

Included in the interview schedule were two types of questions designed to measure evaluations of persons in government. The first type of item was a simple adaptation of the Gallup measure of job performance. Respondents were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way three governmental leaders were handling their

job: President Jimmy Carter, New York Governor Hugh Carey, and Syracuse Mayor Lee Alexander. These measures, then, focused on the individual holding the highest elective office at each of the three levels of government.

The second type of measure is the more typical for ascertaining levels of trust in government. Respondents were asked first if they "tended to feel that the people running the government care or don't care what happens to you." A second item asked: "Do you tend to agree or disagree that most officials are in politics for what they personally can get out of it for themselves?" The two questions were asked for federal, state and city officials, in that order. Responses to these two questions were combined to form a single index of trust for each level of government.

Media dependency was measured on both the national and local level by combining answers to several questions on media use habits. A person was scored high in newspaper dependence for national news if he or she reported getting most of the news about what's going on in the world from newspapers, reading a newspaper at least six times a week, and viewing the national early evening television news less than six times a week. A person low in newspaper dependency for national news did none of these things. A

person highly dependent on television for national news reported usually getting most of his or her world news from television, reading a newspaper less than six days a week, and viewing the national early evening television news at least six times a week.

A person high in local newspaper dependency was one who reported relying on newspapers for local news, reading a newspaper at least six times a week, and viewing the local early evening television news less than six times a week. Local television dependency was measured in a parallel fashion.

No measure of media dependency for state news was employed primarily as a pragmatic consideration. The questionnaire had been designed to measure opinions on a series of local issues as well as media dependency and evaluations of governmental leaders. Length of questionnaire quickly became a factor.

Results

Levels of approval of the heads of the federal, state and city governments as well as of trust in officials at those three levels are shown in Table 1. Comparison of the means shows an interesting difference between the two types of measure. President Jimmy Carter enjoys the highest level of job approval. It is, in fact, at an almost

identical level to what he was receiving nationally at the time of the Syracuse study. New York Governor Hugh Carey, however, was given a job approval rating considerably lower than Carter's. Carey's rating, in fact, is lower than the rating of Syracuse Mayor Lee Alexander. All three men are Democrats.

When the more general measure of trust is examined, however, it becomes clear that those officials most distant spatially from the Syracuse respondents were evaluated less highly than those near at hand. City officials are the most trusted; federal officials are the least.

The relationship between the two types of measures, in fact, is not overly strong. Carter's approval rating, for example, is correlated with the ratings of federal officials only .16. In addition, approval of any one of the elected officials is not highly related to approval of the others. Carter's and Carey's approval ratings show a .11 correlation. Carter's and Carey's approval ratings are correlated .12. The approval of Carey is correlated .27 with the approval of Alexander. On the other hand, the interrelationships for the trust measures are quite strong. Trust in federal officials is correlated .56 with trust in state officials, for example.

Table 1 about here

Separate analyses not shown indicate there are no real differences between the responses of low and high educated persons to the questions on job approval or trust. Young and older respondents also did not differ on the job approval questions, though, when the general trust questions are examined, young respondents are found to be less trusting than their older counterparts. Respondents reporting Democratic Party registration are slightly more approving of all three of the elected leaders than Republicans. Republicans, however, are more trusting in officials at all three levels than Democrats.

Levels of media dependency are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

The Syracuse respondents do seem to be more dependent on newspapers than on television for both their national and local news. The measures of dependency on the two media are strongly negatively related. The correlation is -.88 for the national news and -.89 for the local news measures. In part, of course, this negative relationship is forced by the choice of only one medium in the item on media reliance.

But it seems to reflect as well the fact many people are dependent on one or the other of the media for their news. Three-quarters of the Syracuse respondents reported they relied on either newspapers or television for both national and local news.

Dependency for national news is strongly related to dependency for local news. The correlation between the two measures of newspaper dependency is .72; for television the figure is .73.

Separate analyses show the better educated sample members tend to be more newspaper dependent than the lower educated respondents. This is true for both the local and national level. Neither the low nor the high educated respondents, however, have higher television dependency scores than newspaper dependency scores. In other words, both groups are slightly more newspaper dependent than television dependent. Younger sample members are lower in newspaper dependency--particularly for local news--than older members and higher in television dependency.

Analysis of responses to additional questions included in the Syracuse questionnaire shows that media dependency is related to perceptions of media credibility. Persons who think newspapers are the most credible medium, for example, are more likely to have a high newspaper dependency score than persons thinking television the most

credible medium. The relationship holds for both local and national news.

In addition, television dependency was found to be positively correlated with approval of Jimmy Carter's use of that medium for his fireside chat in early 1977. Newspaper dependency was found to be negatively related to approval of that presidential broadcast.

In Table 3, the key correlational data are presented for a test of the expected relationships between media dependency and evaluations of government. The expected

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Table 3 about here

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pattern of findings is a positive correlation between newspaper dependency and the two indicants of job approval as well as between newspaper dependency and the two measures of trust. The correlations should be negative for television dependency.

It is quite clear in Table 3 that there is only partial support for the hypothesis. On the federal level, in fact, there is no evidence of an effect of media dependency. On the local level, the effect is in evidence for both approval of the job performance of the Syracuse mayor and trust in city officials. In other words, those persons classified as high in newspaper dependency do tend to evaluate

Mayor Lee Alexander more highly than persons low in newspaper dependency. And the newspaper dependent respondents also tend to have more trust in local city officials in general. But the relationships are not overly strong ones.

When controls for education and age of the respondent are introduced in Table 4, the picture becomes even more complex. There is almost no evidence, again, of the

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Table 4 about here

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predicted pattern of relationships for the national measures of approval or trust. On the local level as well the evidence of effects is far from consistent. For the young respondents low in education and for the older respondents high in education, the pattern of relationships is in evidence. But the expected relationships surface for the older, low educated respondents only where the local trust measures are concerned. For the younger, better educated respondents, the relationship is present only when the evaluation of Mayor Alexander is examined.

Education was entered as a control to eliminate the possibility of spurious findings. Age was introduced because of the suggestion in the McLeod, et al., (1977) data that the dependency relationships might hold only for younger voters. The data in Table 4 seem to argue both controls

are important, for only where older, better educated respondents are concerned do the relationships surface with any real strength. And media dependency seems to be related to evaluations of local government rather than to evaluations of federal officials.

While the data presented so far are not overly supportive of the notion that newspaper and television dependent persons evaluate their governmental leaders differentially, there is evidence in the data gathered in the Syracuse study that media dependency has an important effect on respondents. Newspaper dependent persons, the data show, are more likely to be knowledgeable about local governmental affairs than non-newspaper dependent persons. Persons high in television dependency, on the other hand, tend to be low in knowledge.

This inference is based on responses to two items in the questionnaire which asked factual questions about city government as well as answers to two other questions on knowledge of local leaders. Respondents first were asked to indicate the size of the city council. They next were asked to indicate which party presently controlled city government. Both have unambiguous answers. There are nine council members. Seven of the nine are Democrats, as is the Mayor.

Persons interviewed also were asked to indicate what they would tell someone unfamiliar with city affairs about the two candidates for mayor in the upcoming election. The question provided the respondents only the names and party affiliations of the candidates. Though the incumbent mayor was seeking reelection, he had not been identified as mayor at the point in the questionnaire where this information was obtained. For the purpose of these analyses, persons were classified according to how much information they could provide regarding the two candidates.

Table 5 about here

The data in Table 5 are consistent with the expectation that media dependency affects audience members. Newspaper dependency is positively associated with high levels of knowledge regarding city matters. Television dependency is negatively associated with the knowledge measures.

Introduction of the education and age controls, shown in Table 6, does not change the general inference. To be sure, the effects are strongest and most consistent for the older, low-educated respondents and for the younger, high educated persons. But there is some evidence in all four groups of the relationship.

Table 6 about here

Conclusions

The data from the Syracuse study suggest that media dependency has some effects on audience members. First, those persons who were heavily dependent on newspapers for their local information were found to be more knowledgeable about local governmental affairs than those persons not dependent on that medium. Persons dependent on television, on the other hand, were less knowledgeable than persons not television dependent. The relationship held after controls for education and age and is consistent with the finding by Robinson (1974) that television dependent persons were less knowledgeable about Watergate than newspaper dependent persons.

There is some evidence, as well, that persons dependent on newspapers are more favorably inclined toward local governmental officials than persons not newspaper dependent. Television dependent persons tend to be less favorable towards and trusting in local leaders than those not dependent on that medium. The relationship, however, is not consistent for all respondents.

The relationship between dependency and evaluations of leaders, quite clearly, is limited to local government in the Syracuse data. Though earlier studies had suggested this relationship held for the national level as well, there simply is no evidence of it here. Separate analysis of this relationship using simple media exposure or simple reliance on the media rather than the index of dependency created here does not change that picture.

Since the Syracuse study did not include questions on the knowledge levels of respondents regarding national affairs, it was not possible to determine if the relationship between dependency and knowledge held for the national as well as the local level. Given the generally high level of correlation between various measures of political knowledge and the discovery of such a relationship for the Watergate period, however, it seems likely that media dependency would affect political knowledge on various levels.

In general, the data seem to suggest that the relationship between media dependency and evaluations of government may be more complex than some of the early research had suggested. Rather than affecting attitudes directly, media dependency may first determine how much information audience members have regarding government. That level of information may help determine the attitudes

held regarding government. Those persons in the Syracuse study with more information on city affairs were more trusting in city leadership in general. In other words, the data are at least partially supportive of such an indirect link between dependency and evaluations of local officials.

Evidence that any attitudinal consequences of dependency result from knowledge gain rather than directly from dependency itself actually strengthens the inference that the news in the media are determining the attitudes. Otherwise it would be possible to argue that the attitudes could be created by heavy media use itself, rather than by dependency on the medium for public affairs information. In fact, the Gerbner and Gross (1976) analyses suggest such just a link between exposure and attitudes. But knowledge of local affairs can only be gained from the public affairs content of the local media. So the linkage between information held and attitudes becomes a particularly important one.

More information, of course, is needed on that linkage as well as the linkage of dependency to knowledge. Systematic analysis of the public affairs materials of the various media is needed as well to determine exactly what it is that produces the media dependency effects. Such information can aid media practitioners in production of the news materials. In this way, any dangerous consequences of media dependency can be altered.

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TABLE I

Approval of Leaders and Trust in Officials of the Federal, State and City Governments

Federal	Mean	sd
Approval of President Jimmy Carter (range: 1-3)	2.65	.61
Trust in Federal Officials (range: 1-5)	2.63	1.54
State		
Approval of Governor Hugh Carey (range: 1-3)	1.82	.85
Trust in State Officials (range: 1-5)	2.71	1.52
City		
Approval of Mayor Lee Alexander (range: 1-3)	2.39	.82
Trust in City Officials (range: 1-5)	3.37	1.49
N=	460	

TABLE 2

Dependency on Newspapers and Television for National and Local News

National	Means	sd
Dependency on Newspapers (range: 0-3)	1.62	.91
Dependency on Television (range: 0-3)	1.13	.92
Local		
Dependency on Newspapers (range: 0-3)	1.57	.93
Dependency on Television (range: 0-3)	1.18	.93

N= 460

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Media Dependency and Evaluations of Governmental Leaders

	Newspaper Dependency	Television Dependency
Federal		
Approval of Carter	-.00	.03
Trust in Officials	.00	-.00
City		
Approval of Alexander	.08*	-.07
Trust in Officials	.09*	-.07

N= 460

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

Note: The appropriate measure of dependency was used for the two levels of government. In other words, the correlation shown in the first column and first row is for national newspaper dependency and approval of Carter.

TABLE 4

Correlations Between Media Dependency and Evaluations of Governmental Leaders

Controlling for Education and Age

	18 to 28 Years Old		More Than 28 Years Old	
	Newsp. Dep.	TV Dep.	Newsp. Dep.	TV Dep.
High School Degree or Less				
Federal				
Approval of Carter	-.06	.05	-.03	.01
Trust in Officials	.10	-.19	-.05	.03
City				
Approval of Alexander	.11	.01	-.05	.06
Trust in Officials	.09	-.08	.15*	-.11
N=	62		189	
At Least Some College				
Federal				
Approval of Carter	.10	.02	-.01	.07
Trust in Officials	.06	.05	-.06	.06
City				
Approval of Alexander	.14	-.08	.23*	-.23*
Trust in Officials	-.12	.18	.12	-.17*
N=	87		122	

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

Note: The appropriate measure of dependency was used for the two levels of government.

TABLE 5

Correlations Between Local Media Dependency and Knowledge of City Affairs

Knowledge	Newspaper dependency	Television Dependency
Size of Council	.10*	-.08*
Party Controlling City	.11*	-.11*
Candidates for Mayor	.20*	-.19*

N= 460

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

TABLE 6

Correlations Between Local Media Dependency and Knowledge of City Affairs

Controlling For Education and Age

High School Degree or Less

	18 to 28 Years Old		More Than 28 Years Old	
Knowledge	Newsp. Dep.	TV Dep.	Newsp. Dep.	TV Dep.
Size of Council	-.04	-.07	.07	-.03
Party Controlling City	.12	-.15	.08	-.07
Candidates for Mayor	.04	.01	.16*	-.15*
N=	62		189	

At Least Some College

Knowledge				
Size of Council	.15	-.12	.03	-.06
Party Controlling City	.20*	-.12	.00	-.05
Candidates for Mayor	.12	-.09	.26*	-.29*
N=	87		122	

*Significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.